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SUBJECT Full Text

TED KOPPEL: This time the Soviets seem to have opted for a long-term change. The man who took charge within hours of Konstantin Chernenko's death represents a new generation. But what else does he represent? And what, if anything, should we expect from those U.S.-Soviet arms talks which get underway as scheduled tomorrow morning?

We'll talk live with Henry Kissinger, with former British Minister of Defense Denis Healey, and with a former high-ranking Soviet diplomat, Arkady Shevchenko.

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KOPPEL: The transitional period, it would seem, is over. Another Soviet leader who was too old and too sick when he took power to hold on to it has died. And now a 54-year-old has taken over, someone who, theoretically at least, will be around for a generation. Get used to the name, Mikhail Gorbachev. According to at least normal life expectancy, Gorbachev should have plenty of time to put his mark on Soviet affairs.

And take note of something else. Tomorrow morning in Geneva, just a few hours before the late Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko is buried, U.S.-Soviet arms talks get underway. Certainly American negotiators would have understood if their Soviet counterparts had requested a 48-hour delay, but no one even asked.

We begin our examination of this new chapter in U.S.-Soviet affairs by turning to Arkady Shevchenko, a former aide to Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, later an Undersecretary of the U.N., and even later a defector to the United States.

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Mr. Shevchenko, explain that to me. Why this urgency to continue with those U.S.-Soviet arms talks as scheduled?

ARKADY SHEVCHENKO: The Soviet leadership attach great importance to the forthcoming arms control negotiations. There are both domestic and external pressure on the Soviet leadership. And above all, they're interested in preserving what they call the strategic military parity.

KOPPEL: I understand that. What I'm talking about now is a very, very narrow question. No one would have thought anything was wrong, no one would have believed that the Soviets placed any lesser premium on those talks if it asked for a 24-hour delay, a 48-hour delay. Why move ahead, literally, as the funeral arrangements are underway?

SHEVCHENKO: Well, why not? I see no problem there.

KOPPEL: Well, I assure you if an American President died, that American negotiators would come back for the funeral.

SHEVCHENKO: Well, I'm sorry, but Chernenko cannot be compared with American President. Soviet Union, Kremlin have the collective leadership, a few key men who've been running the country, not only in the Chernenko period of time, but in the period when Andropov was stricken, even before. So for them it was no surprise, no problem. They knew what is going to happen. And why, I mean, to delay negotiations?

KOPPEL: All right. No big deal, then.

SHEVCHENKO: No big deal.

KOPPEL: All right. No bid deal, then, that you have a 54-year-old Party Chairman now? No big deal that this man is going to be around for 20 years, maybe?

SHEVCHENKO: Let me tell you, Ted, that first of all we have to be more careful in talking that Gorbachev already become a person who has a power which Brezhnev had or Khrushchev before had, because still majority in the Politburo in the hands of the old people. The party apparatus in the Soviet Union is of older men, and he has a lot of time to go before he can consolidate his power and become a real leader.

KOPPEL: I heard one television correspondent -- I'm not even sure if it was on our network -- but one television correspondent today speak rather glowingly of this Kennedy-like image. Here you've got this young, enthusiastic, vital new Soviet leader with his very attractive wife, lovely young children. Does that make any difference at all?

SHEVCHENKO: Don't be impressed by that. It's -- of course, it's very good for the public, I mean, and after the Soviet leaders for so many years have been actually invalids who disappear from the public opinion for so long. I mean Gorbachev, who is intelligent man, who is a very social and well-educated, and so on and so forth, but we have to have no illusions that we still deal not with one person, we deal with the Soviet system, we deal with the Politburo, we deal with the party apparatus in the Soviet Union, and not just a new leader.

He will be more dynamic, with a new style, perhaps with some changes in the domestic policy of the Soviet Union. But I doubt that there will be any changes in the foreign policy of the Soviet Union.

KOPPEL: All right. Give me a very quick, if you would, thumbnail sketch. You met him back in 1977. Your impressions of him in terms that we can understand.

SHEVCHENKO: My impression was very good about him. And it not only was my impression. Because he was a good manager in industry, in agriculture in Stavropolskaiya (?) when he was a First Secretary, and he impressed very much the leader of the Soviet Union who'd been coming to resort in Kislovodsk, Kosygin, Andropov and others. And I think he made a career there, because many other regional leaders in the Soviet Union, the party leaders, they didn't have such an opportunity.

And I think that there is a potential in Gorbachev for the future. But let's not exaggerate at this stage. Let's wait for some time before we come to any conclusion what kind of a leader he will be.

In the past, you know, how many mistakes have been done involve the Soviet leaders. Let's wait and see what he will do in several years, and then we will come to a conclusion.

KOPPEL: On that note of caution, let's take a break. Later we will talk with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and with former British Minister of Defense Denis Healey about the impact of Gorbachev's accession to the power, on the Geneva arms talks.

But first, when we return, Nightline correspondent James Walker looks at the issues the two superpowers must deal with at Geneva.

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KOPPEL: When the U.S. delegation to the arms talks arrived in Geneva this weekend, chief U.S. negotiator Max

Kampelman warned that the differences between Washington and Moscow are profound. The Soviet delegation, on its arrival Sunday, sounded a rare note of agreement, at least on that point. But the Russians blamed the U.S. and President Reagan's Star Wars proposal for making the task of arms control so difficult.

Here's a report from Nightline correspondent James Walker on the issues that must be dealt with.

JAMES WALKER: The selection of Mikhail Gorbachev as Communist Party Secretary raises a crucial question about the future course of the Geneva arms control talks -- namely, will Gorbachev be able to assert himself, as his predecessors Chernenko and Andropov could not, and fashion his own arms control strategy? The last Soviet leader to do that was Leonid Brezhnev, the place Moscow, May 1972. In a warm and cordial atmosphere, Brezhnev sat down with President Nixon to sign the historic SALT I strategic arms limitation agreement. The centerpiece was the ABM, or anti-ballistic missile, treaty. Both sides agreed to deploy only token defenses against a nuclear missile attack by the other. The agreement began an era of detente and heightened prospects for future arms control.

Here on the frigid plains of North Dakota can be found one legacy of the ABM treaty. Each side was permitted only one ABM base. The U.S. chose to put its here, defending an area populated by offensive missiles, not by people. The complex went operational in 1974, but was quickly shut down by a budget-cutting Congress.

This abandoned anti-missile base is a monument to the idea that war in the nuclear age was best prevented if both sides were vulnerable to nuclear annihilation. The doctrine was called mutual assured destruction. Its nickname, appropriately, was MAD. MAD was the basis of an arms control process that effectively killed the idea in this country of trying to defend against a nuclear missile attack.

But all that changed on March 23rd, 1983, when President Reagan offered a different vision of a future dominated by something other than the balance of terror.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?

WALKER: Ambassador Gerard Smith held negotiate the SALT I treaty. Smith believes that by resurrecting the idea of missile defenses, President Reagan undermined the basis of 15

years of arms control efforts.

AMBASSADOR GERARD SMITH: The premise of the ABM treaty, I think, has been proved correct: that if you have a hold on defenses, the prospect of getting limitations on offensives is somewhat better.

FRED IKLE: That theory has been totally disproven, because, as you know, the Soviet arms buildup in strategic forces continued year after year. For the last 15 years they've had the biggest nuclear buildup in history, the ABM treaty notwithstanding.

And indeed, as we now look back, many of us realize an intellectual mistake was made.

WALKER: Fred Ikle also worked on the SALT negotiations. Now a top Pentagon official, he offers a quite different approach to arms reductions.

IKLE: We will, as the President indicated, use the negotiations in Geneva to discuss a different concept, where we both could move to a relationship where defensive forces become increasingly more dominant, where we could make this transition in a stable fashion, and where we then could reduce offensive forces sharply, and eventually eliminate nuclear offensive systems.

WALKER: The Reagan strategy emphasizing defense relies on scientific developments since the early 1970s. The ABM systems of that time used high-speed rockets with nuclear warheads to intercept incoming weapons high above the United States. But this type of defense was easily overwhelmed by another technical innovation that made it possible to pack several nuclear warheads into the nose cone of a single missile.

Now, recent laboratory experiments with lasers and particle beams offer hope that an effective non-nuclear missile defense may now be possible. These weapons would be based in space to destroy Soviet missiles shortly after launch, before they can deploy their numerous harder-to-hit warheads.

President Reagan's \$30 billion research program on these defensive technologies is considered by some to be an additional obstacle to arms control.

AMBASSADOR SMITH: What I'm afraid of is that by seeking a technical solution, we are preventing the arrival of a real solution which lies in agreements between the two parties.

WALKER: The two negotiating teams are now in Geneva, set to begin their long-awaited talks tomorrow. President Reagan

appears determined to go ahead with his Strategic Defense Initiative, hoping that it will lead to a more secure world. The Soviets are equally determined to stop it, saying that it can only set off a new arms race in space.

The death of Konstantin Chernenko and the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev seem to have had no effect on Soviet strategy in Geneva. The differences between the two sides are so profound that no one is expecting an agreement any time soon.

KOPPEL: When we come back we'll discuss the impact of the Kremlin changeover on the Geneva talks with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and with Denis Healey, former British Minister of Defense, who talked at length with Gorbachev when the Soviet official visited London last December.

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KOPPEL: Joining us live now from our affiliate KTRK in Houston is Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State; and in our New York studios, Denis Healey, British Labor Party spokesman on foreign affairs and former Minister of Defense. Mr. Healey has met and talked with both Mikhail Gorbachev, the new Soviet leader, and with his predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko.

I hope you'll understand if we focus greater interest at the moment on the man who has taken power. Do you accept what Mr. Shevchenko said at the top of this program, that it will be a long time before he really asserts control?

DENIS HEALEY: No, I don't actually believe that. I think, to begin with, the age of the Politburo has gone down a good deal since Andropov died, because the old men who died have not been replaced, and the young men whom Andropov brought in, like Varotnikov (?), Aliyev, Chebrikov, are now major figures, along with Romanov and Gorbachev himself.

So, I think Gorbachev's influence, the fact that he's been clearly slated to take over for the last year, will be very substantial right away, but not in the arms control field. When we met him we found that he constantly asked General Chervov (?), who is an old veteran, right back from SALT I, to answer the detail questions.

I think Gorbachev's main interest will be seeing that something is done to reduce the crushing burden of armaments on the Soviet Union, because he's primarily concerned to revive the Soviet economy, and he knows that can't happen unless they can provide the sort of advanced consumer goods which skilled workers in Russia now want, which they can't have so long as they're spending this money on arms.

And don't forget, according to the CIA, since 1976 Soviet arms spending has been increasing at only half the rate of American arms spending. And since President Reagan came in, American spending's gone up 50 percent in real terms, and Soviet only 10 percent.

But even so, it's an unacceptable burden for the Russians if they want to improve their economic performance.

KOPPEL: Dr. Kissinger, that, then, poses the Russians with a considerable dilemma. Because if, as President Reagan has said, he intends to go ahead with the Strategic Defense Initiative, Star Wars as it's come to be known, that is going to be a multi-multi-multi-billion-dollar program. And if the Soviets have to match it, it'll cost them far more than they've had to spend.

HENRY KISSINGER: Well, I'd like to make two comments.

First, I don't think one can judge Gorbachev's influence only by his relationship to the older generation. In the past, any new General Secretary has had to assert himself, even against his contemporaries. And the exact lineup between Gorbachev, Romanov, Aliyev, and all the others will not become apparent for a year or two. So he will have to spend a fair amount of his time on consolidating his domestic position.

Secondly, of course the strategic defense will impose a burden on the Soviet Union. The question is, what kind of an arms agreement are they prepared to make in order to avoid that burden? And must we give up the concept of strategic defense in order to reach it? And there, I believe that simply reducing offensive weapons at the number of weapons that have been reached will not really make a difference, a significance difference to the threat to humanity. And therefore, it might ease the burden to the Soviet economy somewhat; it will not change the basic strategic equation, particularly.

KOPPEL: Let me go back to a question that I asked Mr. Shevchenko at the beginning of this program. And it wasn't as whimsical a question as it may have seemed. I am wondering why it is that the -- and I interpret it -- and give me your sense of it, if you would, Dr. Kissinger -- I interpret it a little bit as Soviet posturing for publicity purposes -- this emphasis on the U.S.-Soviet arms talks, which from everything I've heard are expected to go on for years before anyone expects anything to come out of them. Why, in that context, was another day or two so important to them?

KISSINGER: Well, because I think they wanted to emphasize for the American public the importance of it. I don't

think that 48 hours would have made any difference to the outcome of these talks.

Incidentally, I believe that the talks will conclude fairly rapidly, I think in something like 18 months.

I want to repeat that the significant problem is what is the agreement going to look like. This debate about strategic defense is taking on somewhat absurd proportions. We have spent -- President Reagan has dedicated \$30 billion to research. President Carter had dedicated \$19 billion for research. So we're speaking about \$11 billion difference over a five-year period. And what exactly is it that the Soviets are asking us to do? Are we supposed to stop research? Are we supposed to stop testing? What is it that they want from us?

HEALEY: I think what they want they've made quite clear. I talked about this to Zagardin (?) when I was in Moscow in November, and also to Mr. Gorbachev. They're worried, like the last three Secretaries of State under the last three American Presidents, that President Reagan's stated aim is unachievable, that the most America can hope to achieve is point defense of some of its land-based missiles. And if that's the purpose, to the Russians it looks as if they're trying to prepare for a possible first strike against the Soviet Union, so that only a small proportion of the Soviet missiles can come back at the United States, and enough of those can be stopped on the way by this system.

And I think the Russians are anxious, not to stop research, because we all know you can't verify what happens in laboratories or people's minds, but to stop things which can be verified, which are visible, like the tests of components in a space-based system, the shuttle test which is now planned, I gather, for two years' time.

And the most interesting thing is President Reagan did offer last year the possibility of a moratorium on anti-satellite tests. Mr. Burt of the State Department let it be known he was in favor of this. It now seems to have fallen out of the window. And I think the basic objective must be to get that sort of agreement, because the thing is urgent. The Russians...

KOPPEL: All right.

HEALEY: Let me make this point. The Russians are...

KOPPEL: We're coming down to our last couple of minutes.

HEALEY: Could I just make this central point?

KOPPEL: Please.

HEALEY: This is urgent. And that's why the talks have started right away, because the Russians have to device their next five-year plan at the end of this year, and fill all the vacancies in the Central Committee and the Politburo. And if progress hasn't been made in that period, then the risk is that anything that Gorbachev hopes to achieve may be frustrated.

KISSINGER: But it doesn't make any sense to ask us to stop development of weapons that won't exist for ten years before we even know by how far they are willing to reduce their offensive weapons, especially the heavy weapons that are aimed at our missiles.

And moreover, if they are worried that all we can achieve is a point defense of our missiles, their retaliatory capacity will remain intact because they can always attack our cities if we should attack their missiles.

KOPPEL: Dr. Kissinger, let me jump in and pick up on something you said a moment ago. You expressed the view that you thought these talks would actually achieve something, or at least be over, within 18 months. Why?

KISSINGER: I think that if one reads between the lines what everybody is saying, the outline of some agreement like SALT II, or reduce to a level of 1800 intermediate-range missiles, limited to something like a formula of -- whatever the number is on each side -- and then some form of words that permits research to continue and defers testing for further negotiations seems to me very probable.

I wouldn't be very crazy about such an agreement, but that seems to me, between the lines, is what people are saying on our side.

KOPPEL: Mr. Healey, a final thought just on that. Do you think these talks will be long-lasting, and do you think that they will achieve anything?

HEALEY: My fear is that if they don't achieve something quickly, events in the Soviet Union may preclude any real advance. And it's no good talking in terms of SALT I and II. Some of the new weapons being developed, anti-satellite systems which could destroy the eyes and ears which give early warning to both sides, cruise missiles, which are easily hidden and can carry nuclear or conventional weapons, those things will [be] beyond the point of no return unless agreement is reached to stop them in the next year.

KOPPEL: ...I'm afraid we're out of time.